

DOCKET No.  
NA11P008/01.113.01

U.S. PATENT APPLICATION  
FOR  
SYSTEM, METHOD AND COMPUTER PROGRAM  
PRODUCT FOR IMPROVED EFFICIENCY IN  
NETWORK ASSESSMENT UTILIZING VARIABLE  
TIMEOUT VALUES

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# SYSTEM, METHOD AND COMPUTER PROGRAM PRODUCT FOR IMPROVED EFFICIENCY IN NETWORK ASSESSMENT UTILIZING VARIABLE TIMEOUT VALUES

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## **FIELD OF THE INVENTION**

The present invention relates to risk-assessment scanning methods, and more particularly to risk-assessment scanning with improved efficiency.

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## **BACKGROUND OF THE INVENTION**

Network security management is becoming a more difficult problem as networks grow in size and become a more integral part of organizational operations. Attacks on networks are growing both due to the intellectual challenge such attacks represent for hackers and due to the increasing payoff for the serious attacker. Furthermore, the attacks are growing beyond the current capability of security management tools to identify and quickly respond to those attacks. As various attack methods are tried and ultimately repulsed, the attackers will attempt new approaches with more subtle attack features. Thus, maintaining network security is on-going, ever changing, and an increasingly complex problem.

Computer network attacks can take many forms and any one attack may include many security events of different types. Security events are anomalous network conditions each of which may cause an anti-security effect to a computer network. Security events include stealing confidential or private information; producing network damage through mechanisms such as viruses, worms, or Trojan horses; overwhelming the network's capability in order to cause denial of service, and so forth.

Network security risk-assessment tools, i.e. "scanners," may be used by a network manager to simulate an attack against computer systems via a remote connection. Such scanners can probe for network weaknesses by simulating certain types of security events that make up an attack. Such tools can also test user passwords for suitability and security. Moreover, scanners can search for known types of security events in the form of malicious programs such as viruses, worms, and Trojan horses.

During the course of scanning, such security risk-assessment tools often open remote network connections to various target systems. Most of these connections rely on Transmission Control Protocol/Internet Protocol (TCP/IP) connectivity to establish communications, and test for security risks. There are many of such security vulnerabilities. As such, testing for the presence of the vulnerabilities can become quite time consuming, especially when auditing a network consisting of hundreds or thousands of systems.

Many aspects of scanning contribute to the latency of such process. One prominent aspect is the time that a target system takes to respond to network requests and the time that individual packets of data require to travel between a source system performing a risk-assessment scan and the target system of such a scan.

In the course of auditing for particular security threats, a scanner typically institutes a predefined timeout before determining that the target system is not responding. In order to optimize performance when scanning many systems or scanning a single system for many vulnerabilities, a scanner may lower this timeout value to prevent unnecessary waiting for unresponsive remote target systems. Due to varying network conditions, however, a timeout value that is set too low may result in abandoning scans against vulnerable systems that are only reachable over a high latency (i.e. slow data transfer speeds) network.

Prior Art Figure 1A shows an exemplary system **100** which is subject to scanning latencies. As shown, such system **100** includes the Internet **102** which is in turn coupled to a wide area network (WAN) **104**. The networks **102** and **104** are coupled via a router **106** for communication purposes.

Coupled to the networks **102** and **104** is a plurality of computers which include at least one scanning source **108** and a plurality of target computers **110**. As shown in Figure 1A, communication latencies may vary between the scanning source **108** and the target computers **110** due to variable network conditions existent in the networks **102** and **104**. For example, a first and second target computer may require less than 10ms to respond to the scanning source **108**, while a third and fourth target computer may require more than 200ms to respond to the scanning source **108**.

Prior Art Figure 1B shows exemplary statistics illustrating the manner in which timeouts contribute to scanning latencies. As shown, the actual response latency due to network conditions for a first and second target computer is less than 10ms, while a third and fourth target computer requires more than 200ms to respond. In each scan, the default timeout is set at 500ms, a constant value in accordance with the prior art. Accordingly, there is a net time lost in each scan which varies based on network conditions. See Figure 1B.

There is thus a need for a scanner capable of reducing the latency of the scanning process while avoiding abandoning vulnerable systems reachable over high latency networks.

**DISCLOSURE OF THE INVENTION**

5 A system, method and computer program product are provided for executing a risk-assessment scan with a variable timeout duration which is set based on network conditions. Initially, network conditions are measured in a network coupled between a source and a target. Subsequently, a risk-assessment scan is executed on the target from the source. A timeout is performed prior to making a determination that the target is failing to respond to the risk-assessment scan. Such timeout includes a variable duration which is set as a function of the measured network conditions.

10 In one embodiment, the network conditions may include a latency associated with communication between the source and the target.

15 In another embodiment, the network conditions are measured by transmitting a probe signal from the source to the target utilizing the network. Such probe signal prompts the target to send a response signal to the source utilizing the network. Thereafter, the response signal is received from the target utilizing the network. A response duration is then measured between the transmission of the probe signal and the receipt of the response signal. By this design, the timeout may be set as a function of the response duration.

20 As an option, the timeout of variable duration may be set by adding a default value with a variable value which is set as a function of the measured network conditions. Moreover, the timeout may be set by multiplying a default value with a variable factor which is set as a function of the measured network conditions.

30 In still another embodiment, the risk-assessment scan may include the execution of a plurality of risk-assessment scan modules. In such embodiment, the timeout may be performed for each of the risk-assessment scan modules.

Optionally, a result of the measurement of the network conditions may be stored. Further, the risk-assessment scan may be abandoned if the target fails to respond to the risk-assessment scan within the variable duration.

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As yet another option, the network conditions may be measured for an entire network segment on which a plurality of targets are located. As such, the measured network conditions may be used to set the timeout for each of the targets located on the network segment.

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**BRIEF DESCRIPTION OF THE DRAWINGS**

Prior Art Figure **1A** shows an exemplary system which is subject to scanning  
5 latencies, in accordance with the prior art.

Prior Art Figure **1B** shows exemplary statistics illustrating the manner in  
which timeouts contribute to scanning latencies, in accordance with the prior art.

10 Figure **2** illustrates a method for executing a risk-assessment scan with a  
variable timeout duration which is set based on network conditions.

Figure **3** illustrates an exemplary network environment in which the present  
embodiment may be implemented.

15 Figure **4** shows a representative hardware environment associated with the  
components of Figure **3**, in accordance with one embodiment.

20 Figures **5A** and **5B** illustrate a more comprehensive method for executing a  
risk-assessment scan with a variable timeout duration, in accordance with another  
embodiment.

Figure **6** illustrates a method of conducting a network condition probe.

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### DESCRIPTION OF THE PREFERRED EMBODIMENTS

Figure 2 illustrates a method **200** for executing a risk-assessment scan with a  
5 variable timeout duration which is set based on network conditions. As is well  
known to those of ordinary skill in the art, network conditions may vary due to  
numerous factors including, but not limited to network congestion, network failure,  
etc.

10 Initially, in operation **202**, such network conditions are measured in a  
network coupled between a source and a target. In the context of the present  
embodiment, the source may include any type of computer capable of carrying out a  
risk-assessment scan. Moreover, the target may include any type of  
hardware/software which may have detectable vulnerabilities to attacks.

15 Subsequently, in operation **204**, a risk-assessment scan is executed on the  
target from the source. When the risk-assessment scan is initiated, a timeout is  
performed prior to making a determination that the target is failing to respond to the  
risk-assessment scan. Note operation **206**. To this end, the risk-assessment scan  
20 may be abandoned if the target fails to respond to the risk-assessment scan within  
the variable duration.

It should be noted that such timeout includes a variable duration which is set  
as a function of the measured network conditions, as indicated in operation **208**. By  
25 this design, the source is capable of reducing the latency of the scanning process by  
setting the variable timeout duration to a minimal value. This is accomplished while  
avoiding abandoning vulnerable systems reachable over high latency networks by  
increasing the variable timeout duration to accommodate such scenarios.



Figure 3 illustrates an exemplary network environment **300** in which the present embodiment may be implemented. As shown, such components include a first network **302**, a second network **304**, and a third network **306**. Of course, any number of networks may be included. Moreover, such networks may take any form including, but not limited to a local area network (LAN), a wide area network (WAN) such as the Internet, etc. The networks **302**, **304** and **306** are coupled via routers **308** for communication purposes.

Coupled to the networks **302**, **304** and **306** is a plurality of components **310** which may take the form of desktop computers, lap-top computers, hand-held computers, printers or any other type of computing hardware/software. In the context of the present embodiment, a plurality of targets **312** are provided which are coupled to at least one scanning source **314** via the networks **302**, **304** and **306**.

As shown in Figure 3, communication latencies may vary between the scanning source **314** and the targets **312** due to variable network conditions. For example, it may require a first target **312** 100ms to respond to the scanning source **314**, while a second target **312** requires 500ms to respond to the scanning source **314**.

Figure 4 shows a representative hardware environment associated with the components **310** of Figure 3, in accordance with one embodiment. Such figure illustrates a typical hardware configuration of a workstation in accordance with a preferred embodiment having a central processing unit **410**, such as a microprocessor, and a number of other units interconnected via a system bus **412**.

The workstation shown in Figure 4 includes a Random Access Memory (RAM) **414**, Read Only Memory (ROM) **416**, an I/O adapter **418** for connecting peripheral devices such as disk storage units **420** to the bus **412**, a user interface adapter **422** for connecting a keyboard **424**, a mouse **426**, a speaker **428**, a

microphone **432**, and/or other user interface devices such as a touch screen (not shown) to the bus **412**, communication adapter **434** for connecting the workstation to a communication network **435** (e.g., a data processing network) and a display adapter **436** for connecting the bus **412** to a display device **438**.

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The workstation may have resident thereon an operating system such as the Microsoft Windows NT or Windows/95 Operating System (OS), the IBM OS/2 operating system, the MAC OS, or UNIX operating system. It will be appreciated that a preferred embodiment may also be implemented on platforms and operating systems other than those mentioned. A preferred embodiment may be written using  
10 JAVA, C, and/or C++ language, or other programming languages, along with an object oriented programming methodology. Object oriented programming (OOP) has become increasingly used to develop complex applications.

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Figures **5A** and **5B** illustrate a more comprehensive method **500** for executing a risk-assessment scan with a variable timeout duration, in accordance with another embodiment. First, a network condition probe is initiated in operation **502**. The purpose of such network condition probe is to identify any latency, i.e. response duration  $R_{\text{actual}}$ , attributable solely to network conditions. As mentioned  
20 earlier, network conditions may vary due to numerous factors including, but not limited to network congestion, network failure, etc. More information regarding the network probe will be set forth in greater detail during reference to Figure **6**.

25

Next, in operation **504**, results of the network condition probe are stored for use later in the present method **500**. The risk-assessment scan is then initiated in operation **506**. In one embodiment, the risk-assessment scan may include the execution of a plurality of risk-assessment scan modules. In the context of the present description, such risk-assessment scan modules refer to different functions that work in conjunction to identify various vulnerabilities during the risk-

assessment scan. Moreover, these vulnerabilities may include any aspect of the target **314** that make it susceptible to an attack or intrusion by an attacker.

With continuing reference to Figure **5A**, the timeout is set by assigning a  
5 default timeout value  $T_{\text{default}}$  in operation **508**. It should be noted that such default  
timeout value  $T_{\text{default}}$  corresponds to a typical default response duration  $R_{\text{default}}$ .  
Ideally, the default timeout value  $T_{\text{default}}$  is set such that the latency incurred by the  
timeout during the scanning process is minimized in view of the default response  
duration  $R_{\text{default}}$ . This may be accomplished by setting the default timeout value  
10  $T_{\text{default}}$  as the sum of the default response duration  $R_{\text{default}}$  and a time the target **312** is  
given to respond.

Thereafter, it is determined in decision **510** whether the default timeout value  
 $T_{\text{default}}$  should be modified in view of a variance in the network conditions. This is  
15 accomplished by reviewing the actual response duration  $R_{\text{actual}}$  stored by the network  
condition probe in operation **504**. If the actual response duration  $R_{\text{actual}}$  deviates from  
the default response duration  $R_{\text{default}}$  by a predetermined amount (i.e. 10%, 20%,  
 $R_{\text{default}} * F$ ), the default timeout value  $T_{\text{default}}$  is modified in operation **512**. In one  
embodiment, a variable value ( $R_{\text{actual}} * N$ ) which is set as a function of the measured  
20 actual response duration  $R_{\text{actual}}$  (i.e. network conditions) may be added to the default  
timeout value  $T_{\text{default}}$ . Table 1 summarizes the foregoing exemplary algorithm that  
may be carried out during decision **510** and operation **512**.

Table 1

25 If  $R_{\text{actual}}$  is  $<$  or  $>$   $R_{\text{default}}$  by  $(R_{\text{default}} * F)$ ,  
then  $T_{\text{actual}} = T_{\text{default}} + R_{\text{actual}} * N$ ;  
else  $T_{\text{actual}} = T_{\text{default}}$ ; and  
where:  
30  $R_{\text{default}}$  = default response duration,  
 $R_{\text{actual}}$  = actual response duration,  
 $T_{\text{default}}$  = default timeout value,

$T_{\text{actual}}$  = actual timeout value,  
 $P$  = deviation factor, and  
 $N$  = normalizing factor.

5           In various other embodiments, the timeout may be set by multiplying the default timeout value  $T_{\text{default}}$  with a variable factor which is set as a function of the measured network conditions. It should be noted that the algorithm need not necessarily start with and alter a default timeout value  $T_{\text{default}}$  and, instead, calculate the actual timeout value  $T_{\text{default}}$  from scratch.

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          In still another embodiment, a plurality of network condition probes (See operation **502** of Figure **5** and Figure **6**) may be conducted to gather multiple network condition measurements on a single target **312**. In such embodiment, a minimum, average, deviance from the average, or maximum of the network  
15   condition measurements may be used in tailoring the timeout to the particular network conditions. It should be noted that any other algorithm may be used to tailor the variable duration to accommodate the measured network conditions.

          Once the timeout is set, the current risk-assessment module may be run in  
20   operation **514**. Note Figure **5B**. If during such scan, the target **312** fails to respond within the duration determined in decision **510** and operation **512**, the risk-assessment module may be abandoned. As such, operation **514** results in either scan results or a system failure within the variable timeout duration.

25           After the current risk-assessment module is run, it is determined in decision **516** as to whether any further risk-assessment modules remain. If so, a next risk-assessment module is selected in operation **518**, and operations **514-516** are repeated. If no further risk-assessment modules remain in decision **516**, the method **500** is terminated.

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It should be noted that the foregoing method may be performed on any number of target components **312**. In an embodiment where more than one target component **312** is scanned, the timeout values may be set for each target component **312**. In the alternative, the target components **312** may be grouped as a function of the network conditions, and the timeout values may be set for each group. In any case, the target components **312** may each be probed in operation **502**, the results may be stored in operation **504**, and the timeout may be set in operation **508**. Of course, any desired method of addressing a plurality of target component **312** may be employed.

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In still another embodiment, the network conditions may be measured for an entire network segment on which a plurality of target components **312** is located. As such, the measured network conditions may be used to set the timeout for each of the target components **312** located on the network segment. The present embodiment thus avoids the need to perform a probe and determine a timeout value for every single target component **312** on a network segment.

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Figure **6** illustrates a method **600** of conducting a network condition probe in accordance with operation **502** of Figure **5**. Initially, in operation **602**, a probe signal is transmitted from the source to the target utilizing the network. Such probe signal prompts the target to send a response signal to the source utilizing the network.

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Thereafter, it is determined whether the response signal is received from the target. Note decision **604**. If a response is received, the process is ended and a response duration may be measured and stored in subsequent operations. If no response is received, however, various other methods may be employed to measure network conditions.

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For example, a TCP connect may be initiated in operation 606. Again, if a response is received, the process is ended. Note decision 608. It should be understood that any other method of measuring network conditions may be initiated solely or in combination with the foregoing techniques. See operation 610. For  
5 example, an echo request (i.e. "ping") may be utilized as well as a message utilizing the Internet Control Message Protocol (ICMP), or any other signal that elicits a response. In a particular embodiment, an ICMP Type 8, code 0 "echo request" packet may be utilized. In still another embodiment, a TCP "syn" packet may be sent, and a time period may be measured between when the packet is sent and an  
10 appropriate response (i.e. TCP "rst" or TCP "syn-ack" packet) is received.

The present embodiments thus provide a mechanism to vary the length of a timeout depending on network conditions. By this design, the scanning source is capable of reducing the latency of the scanning process by setting the variable  
15 timeout duration to a minimal value. This is accomplished while avoiding abandoning vulnerable systems reachable over high latency networks.

While various embodiments have been described above, it should be understood that they have been presented by way of example only, and not  
20 limitation. Thus, the breadth and scope of a preferred embodiment should not be limited by any of the above-described exemplary embodiments, but should be defined only in accordance with the following claims and their equivalents.